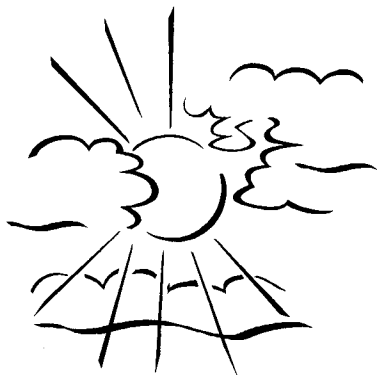


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Wednesday, March 15, 2006

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Wednesday, March 15, 2006

Betty DeRamus

There's no test that will guarantee safe harbor for children

"All prospective parents should be required to pass a parenting test to prove they can provide for all the needs of a child," insists W.P. Somerville of Fenton.

Those needs, he adds, should include "adequate income to cover sufficient food, clothing, housing and sanitation" and the ability to meet an offspring's "spiritual needs."

It's an alluring idea, isn't it? Why not license biological parents the same way you license or certify drivers, builders, plumbers, teachers, doctors and other professionals?

Actually, I have no problem with urging or even requiring new mothers and fathers to read hospital-provided booklets on basic child care before taking their babies home.

At the least, it might lessen the chances of a new parent shaking a baby to death or leaving babies alone for hours in a hot car while the mother gets her hair done.

System has flaws

Yet in a democracy, there's no way to force people to pass parenting tests or attend parenting classes unless they're already neglected or battered their kids and lost custody.

More to the point, it's not really possible to determine solely from income who can best care for a child.

Which test can tell you who is most likely to keep a child locked in a closet day after day with no playmates except rats?

And which test can pick out the man or woman most likely to watch television while a baby drowns in bath water or a dog bites off a baby's foot?

We do have a system that's supposed to safeguard children by investigating charges of child abuse and neglect on the part of biological and foster parents.

Sadly, that overworked and underfunded system doesn't always work. If you've been following the story of the short life and horrendous death of little Ricky Holland, you already know that.

Ricky's adoptive parents, Lisa and Tim Holland of Williamston Township, each is charged with first-degree child abuse and open murder in his death.

Test is needed

I made the mistake this week of reading a story about the ongoing preliminary examination for the Hollands in 55th District Court. Ricky may have been alive when he was stuffed into garbage bags and buried in a rural Ingham County game area, one expert witness testified.

That's not the sort of image you can erase with one stroke of a computer key.

That's the kind of image that seeps into your soul and stays there.

It made me remember 7-month-old Miracle Jackson. In 2000, Miracle's body was found wrapped in a plastic bag and dumped in a vacant Detroit lot. Her father was the culprit.

But we do need to do a better job of protecting kids.

Every day, three children in the U.S. die from abuse and neglect. Thousands more wind up with scarred bodies and spirits.

Too bad we don't have a test that could measure the traits all prospective mothers and fathers need -- the capacity to love, the willingness to sacrifice and the ability to be a parent instead of a friend.

You can reach Betty DeRamus at (313) 222-2296 or bderamus@detnews.com.

We all must help children

Battle Creek Enquirer

The death of a child is one death too many. While we grieve for 7-year-old Ricky Holland and all of the other children hurt by those who are entrusted with their care, we must find the strength to remember that within tragedy lies opportunity. It's not a simple task, for it requires us to look deep within ourselves and ask, "What am I doing to advocate for those whose voices are so small?"

Ricky's saga has touched many lives in a very tangible way. Hundreds of caring individuals gathered to search for Ricky when he was reported missing. Thousands followed the news stories about him, kept him in their thoughts and prayed for his safe return. But there's still much more to be done. Now is the time to collectively channel that same urgency and concern into action. As citizens of courage and compassion, we are called to impact the lives of children by providing positive environments where they can flourish.

There is always a need for capable, loving foster parents. There are few greater gifts that can be given to a child who has experienced abuse and neglect than the gift of a home. More than 18,000 foster care children across Michigan are in desperate need of a safe home, where love is a value, not a reward, and where the necessities are provided by well-trained and well-intentioned people of character. Foster parents are needed to build relationships with children that encourage them to find their strengths and use them to become productive adults. There are many agencies in Michigan that would provide more information on what it takes to become a foster parent. The opportunity lies with you to become the parent these children deserve.

Child advocacy organizations want your help. There are many ways you can raise your voice for children. From a local community organization to national groups, there is no doubt that you will find an organization with the same values as you and a mission that inspires you. These groups welcome help in many forms, from letter writing to event participation, volunteerism to professional careerism. Thousands of children's lives are transformed every day by the caring professionals at these organizations. Over 40 of these organizations are members of the Michigan Federation for Children and Families, a terrific resource for information on child services providers. Find a child advocacy organization to partner with today and begin positively impacting the lives of children forever.

State legislators and agencies need our commitment. Children cannot cast a vote to send their message. It is imperative that all good citizens be their voice. Learn about the issues by contacting your local representatives. Discover the needs of Michigan's children by researching the agencies that provide services to them. The services provided to children in need are ultimately services being provided to you. These services improve your schools and neighborhoods. Be an informed consumer. Currently, there are dozens of bills being introduced that affect the quality of lives for Michigan's children. To follow these bills, log on to Michigan's Children's comprehensive Website(www.michiganschildren.org).

Support legislation and initiatives that provide excellent and efficient service to the children of Michigan.

The responsibility of protecting children like Ricky Holland lies in every citizen. It's easy to read about such tragedies and be overwhelmed by the depth of what needs to be done to ensure the safety and well-being of every child in Michigan. The ultimate truth is that there is something each and every one of us can do to change the lives of troubled children for the better, and the help we can give can't wait.

Martin L. Mitchell is president and chief executive officer of Starr Commonwealth, a 93-year-old national children's organization that provides foster care services in Michigan and Ohio.

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Lansing State Journal

Wednesday's letters to the editor

How was it missed?

As a social worker, I am quite disturbed reading about the testimony in the Ricky Holland preliminary hearing. It appears that professionals testifying don't understand what constitutes abuse. This topic is not always covered thoroughly during one's professional training. Besides, physical patterns of abuse can be humiliation or verbal.

Professionals usually have a code of ethics they follow. Social workers need to advise their clients in advance that they will breach confidentiality if they suspect child abuse, self-harm, or harm to another. To ignore these could mean losing one's license, or worse.

Unfortunately, some social workers don't have the tenacity to report what is blatantly obvious. It is very sad to me that the people who are not professionals saw Ricky's abuse, but the professionals say they did not. If proper reporting and follow-up had been done, perhaps this poor little boy would still be alive.

Donna Rose
East Lansing

Counselors describe chaotic life of dead 7-year-old girl

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By CRYSTAL HARMON
BAY CITY TIMES WRITER

A counselor and a psychiatrist testified Tuesday about their treatment of Monique Yost in the year before the 7-year-old Bay City girl died of a drug overdose, describing a girl troubled by ongoing sexual abuse, who wet the bed, acted out sexually and regressed to babyish behavior. Sixteen jurors heard the testimony as week three of the trial of Donna A. Yost began in the courtroom of Bay County Circuit Judge William J. Caprathe. Yost is charged with an open count of murder for her daughter's death in their former Bay City home on Oct. 10, 1999.

Michelle Hugo, a licensed professional counselor who treated Monique from April 1998 through May 1999, testified that Monique often appeared disheveled, unwashed, tired, sad and angry during counseling sessions. But sometimes, Hugo said, the child was overly affectionate and bubbly.

Monique had indicated that she'd been sexually assaulted by "multiple offenders," Hugo said. Denise Dutchak-Parmenter, who began treating Monique in November 1998, said that Donna Yost indicated that Monique's behavior problems began after being sexually assaulted, at the age of 3, by a 10-year-old girl.

Dutchak-Parmenter prescribed Imipramine for Monique to help combat sleep problems, bed-wetting and anxiety, she said, and adjusted the dosage several times. The last time she renewed the prescription, in May 1999, she reduced the dosage to one 10-milligram capsule at bedtime. The doctor said Monique also seemed depressed over the death of a grandmother in June 1997, and suffered from sinus problems and recurring vaginal infections.

Most of the day's testimony, however, came from Hugo, who answered questions from Assistant Bay County Prosecutor Nancy Borushko, was cross-examined by Defense Attorney Edward M. Czuprynski, and then answered a half-dozen questions posed by jurors and read by the judge.

On Feb. 2, 1999, Hugo reported alleged sexual assaults to Child Protective Services, she said. An assault by a juvenile family friend had been "substantiated," she said, and on Feb. 23, Monique talked about being assaulted by that boy and her brother.

She said Monique regressed after the sexual assaults and had begun baby-talking and acting out in a sexual manner. Hugo said she'd received reports from Donna Yost that Monique had been pulling her pants down and removing pants from younger children and also engaging in sexual behavior at school.

Hugo said Monique Yost's counseling was terminated in May 1999 because she'd missed too many appointments.

Hugo described the Yost household as "stressful, chaotic and conflictual" based on her sessions with Monique and Donna. She said Monique talked about "scary monsters in the attic" and also felt "mad, bad and sad" about the sexual assaults perpetrated upon her.

"She was confused about her body being bad as opposed to unsafe touch happening to her," Hugo said.

Earlier witnesses from the Bay County Prosecutor's Office testified that Monique was to meet with them, the day after she died of an overdose of Imipramine, to discuss being sexually assaulted by a 13-year-old boy and possibly others.

Testimony was to continue today with Monique's father and Donna's ex-husband, Lonnie Yost, expected to be called as a witness for the prosecution.

- Crystal Harmon is a staff writer for The Times. She may be reached at 894-9643 or by e-mail at charmon@bc-times.com.

Adoptive parents give up fight to keep 12 kids

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By Kyla King
The Grand Rapids Press

Beryl and Jerome Richards, once named adoptive parents of the year by a state organization, today gave up their right to 12 adopted children after fighting for almost a year to keep them. Attorney David Murkowski said the couple had been in court-ordered treatment intended to reunite them with their children, who range in age from 7 to 17. But, he said, they decided hard feelings from some of the children who did not want to return, to their care, and a nearly year-long separation, were obstacles too big to overcome.

"They have come to the conclusion that this is an egg that can't be unscrambled," their attorney David Murkowski said. "They are going to allow the children to move forward and all themselves to move forward."

Assistant Kent County Prosecutor Vicki Seidl, who sought to terminate the Richards' parental rights, said she did not consider this a victory.

"In a lot of ways, this is a really sad case because nobody wins," she said. "It's only a victory because the kids will now have a little permanency."

Kristan Newhouse, an attorney who represented 11 of the children, said they will now be released into permanent homes. "I think they will be sad," Newhouse said. "Our goal is to get an adoptive home for every single one of them, if they want that."

The children are in six foster homes now.

In December, a jury found the parents had abused 12 of their adopted children by beating them with leather belts and an extension cord.

But Family Court Judge Nanaruth Carpenter rejected efforts to terminate parental rights and gave Beryl and Jerome Richards the opportunity to regain custody. However, she said they had to make significant changes while in a court-ordered treatment plan.

The children were placed in foster care the last three months.

The case attracted widespread attention because the Richards were named the state's adoptive parents of the year by the Michigan Foster and Adoptive Parent Association in Lansing in 2002 after adopting 13 children. One of those children is now an adult.

The adopted children testified that they were abused and subject to beatings. They said they were not fed properly, and many feared being sent back to the couple.

Man Imprisoned For Selling Baby To Michigan Woman

Baby Sold For \$5,000, Police Say

POSTED: 2:55 pm EST March 14, 2006

A Kentucky man is going to prison for two years for selling his girlfriend's baby for \$5,000 to a Michigan woman.

Kenneth Couch, 23, was sentenced Monday in a courtroom in Williamsburg, Ky., following his felony conviction in January.

Couch and Jessica Cornett sold her 10-month-old daughter in March of 2005 to Kimberly Brick, 30, of Chase, in Michigan's Lake County.

Couch isn't the child's father.

Cornett and Brick were each indicted on the same charge as Couch and each entered Kentucky's equivalent of a no-contest plea.

Cornett, who is now 19, was sentenced to two years in prison.

Brick was given two years of probation.

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Local man arrested in porn probe

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By Lynn Turner

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A Kalamazoo man was arrested last week by federal authorities as part of a national and international investigation into Internet child pornography.

James S. Allen, 38, was arrested March 10 and appeared Monday in U.S. District Court in Grand Rapids, according to a release from the U.S. Department of Justice. Allen's age and address were not released.

Allen's arrest is part of an investigation of people in Michigan, Florida, Tennessee, Nevada, Arizona, Illinois, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and other parts of the globe, according to the news release. The investigation is being conducted by the Justice Department and the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

A press conference on the arrest and Allen's anticipated indictment was to be held this afternoon in Grand Rapids. A separate press conference with U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales was to be held in Chicago. Gonzales said last month that keeping children safe from Internet predators and stemming the flood of Internet child pornography is one of his highest priorities.

Porn probe arrest made

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

KALAMAZOO --

A Kalamazoo man arrested last week by federal authorities in a national and international investigation into Internet child pornography appeared Monday in U.S. District Court in Grand Rapids, U.S. Department of Justice officials said. James S. Allen was arrested March 10 as part of an investigation of people in Michigan, Florida, Tennessee, Nevada, Arizona, Illinois, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and other parts of the globe, officials said.

A press conference on the arrest and Allen's anticipated indictment was to be held today in Grand Rapids. A separate press conference with U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales was to be held today in Chicago.

Time Served

Iowa's Residency Rules Drive Sex Offenders Underground

By MONICA DAVEY
The New York Times

Published: March 15, 2006

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa — One cornfield beyond the trim white farmhouse where the Boland family lives and a road sign warns, "Watch for children and dogs," is a faded motel.

For years a layover for budget-conscious motorists and construction crews, the motel has lately become a disquieting symbol of what has gone wrong with Iowa's crackdown on sexual offenders of children. With just 24 rooms, the motel, the Ced-Rel, was home to 26 registered sex offenders by the start of March.

"Nobody wants to have something associated with sex offenders right beside them," said Steve Boland, a farmer and father of two who learns about his newest neighbors every few weeks when sheriff's deputies stop by with photographs of them.

"Us showing the kids some mug shots sure wasn't going to help," Mr. Boland said. "How were they going to remember that many faces?"

The men have flocked to the Ced-Rel and other rural motels and trailer parks because no one else will, or can, have them. A new state law barring those convicted of sex crimes involving children from living within 2,000 feet of a school or day care center has brought unintended and disturbing consequences. It has rendered some offenders homeless and left others sleeping in cars or in the cabs of their trucks.

And the authorities say that many have simply vanished from their sight, with nearly three times as many registered sex offenders considered missing since before the law took effect in September.

"The truth is that we're starting to lose people," said Don Vrotsos, chief deputy for the Dubuque County sheriff's office and the man whose job it is to keep track of that county's 101 sex offenders.

The statute has set off a law-making race in the cities and towns of Iowa, with each trying to be more restrictive than the next by adding parks, swimming pools, libraries and bus stops to the list of off-limits places. Fearful that Iowa's sex offenders might seek refuge across state lines, six neighboring states have joined the frenzy.

"We don't want to be the dumping ground for their sex offenders," said Tom Brusch, the mayor of Galena, Ill., which passed an ordinance in January.

But even as new bans ripple across the Midwest, the rocky start of the Iowa law — one of at least 18 state laws governing the living arrangements of those convicted of sex crimes — has led to a round of second-guessing about whether such laws really work.

"Nobody wants sex offenders in their area, and on its face, it makes sense that people wouldn't want them near day cares and schools," said Scott Matson, a research associate at the Center for

Sex Offender Management, a nonprofit project financed by the federal Department of Justice. "But there are consequences of removing them."

While some of the Iowa's largest cities, like Des Moines, have become virtually off limits for those convicted of sex crimes involving children, the new rules have pushed many to live in groups away from their families, in places like the Ced-Rel, or the Red Carpet Inn in nearby Bouton, where nine offenders rent rooms.

Michele Costigan, whose driveway is right across Highway 30 from the Ced-Rel in this rural stretch just outside Cedar Rapids, said she had stopped leaving any of her four children at home alone, had told them to dial 911 if anyone they did not recognize pulled into the family driveway, and was considering moving.

"If the point of his law was to make us safer, we are not," Ms. Costigan said.

Even more worrisome to law enforcement officials in Iowa, the restrictions appear to be leading some offenders to slip out of sight.

Of the more than 6,000 people on Iowa's registry of sex offenders, 400 are now listed as "whereabouts unconfirmed" or living in "non-structure locations" (like tents, parking lots or rest areas). Last summer, the number was 140.

"When it comes down to it, we would rather know where these people are living than to have the restriction," said Deputy Vrotsos. He said that he devoted at least 20 hours extra a week, along with the work of two clerks, to administering the new state law.

Last fall, Deputy Vrotsos told about 30 of the offenders that they would have to move to meet the requirements of Iowa's law, which he said made about 90 percent of the city of Dubuque off limits.

Some complied, he said, moving to trailer parks, across the Mississippi River into Illinois, to motels or, in the case of one man who had been living with his parents, to a truck at the loco Truck Stop on the outskirts of town. But at least three of the offenders have disappeared, Deputy Vrotsos said, giving false addresses or not providing any address at all.

The effectiveness and fairness of the restrictions has become a matter of great debate.

Some law enforcement officials say they believe that restrictions keep the most serious sexual predators away from places where they would be most likely to hurt a child again. But others argue that while such laws are politically appealing, there is little empirical evidence to suggest a connection between recidivism and proximity to schools or day care centers, and that the policies are too broad, drawing in, for example, people who as teenagers had sex with an under-age girlfriend.

In Arkansas, a 2001 study found that sexual offenders of children often lived near schools, day care centers and parks. Those results suggested, said Jeffrey T. Walker, a professor from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock who was a co-author of the research, that residency restrictions could be a reasonable deterrent.

But studies for the Colorado Department of Public Safety in 2004 and the Minnesota Department of Corrections in 2003 have suggested that where an offender lives appears to have no bearing on whether he commits another sex crime on a child.

The problems have left some states turning to other means for controlling registered sex offenders, particularly with public outcry after cases like the rape and killing of 9-year-old Jessica Lunsford in Florida last year; a convicted sex offender is accused in the attack.

A flurry of new legislation is being considered all over the country. More legislatures are considering joining a dozen that already use satellite tracking devices on offenders. Others, including Iowa, are considering harsher prison sentences for those who attack children.

Lawmakers reason that they would not have to worry about recidivism if offenders rarely emerged from prison.

Jerry Behn, a Republican state senator, proposed Iowa's residency law after a constituent called him to point out that a registered sex offender was living in a home that looked out over a schoolyard in Boone, Mr. Behn's hometown.

The legislation passed overwhelmingly in 2002, but was challenged in a lawsuit. A federal judge ruled that the law was unconstitutional, but a three judge panel from the appeals court overturned the ruling.

Almost immediately, other states felt the reverberations. Chief Steven M. O'Connell of the East Dubuque, Ill., police said he began getting "an appalling number" of calls from offenders from Dubuque who wanted to know if they could legally live in his town instead. Sheriff Timothy F. Dunning of Douglas County, Neb., not far from Council Bluffs, Iowa, said that new sex offenders rarely moved to town in the past, but that since last fall, 28 had arrived.

Despite the problems, legislators in Iowa are unlikely to ease the distance restriction anytime soon, said State Senator Larry McKibben, a Republican who is leading a legislative task force on sex offender policies.

"It may have created some hardships for sex offenders," Mr. McKibben said. "But over all, I feel like with the spate of sex offenders in the past few years, this has at least caused parents to be more aware of what is going on."

Corwin R. Ritchie, executive director of the Iowa Association of County Attorneys, which opposes the law, said it had created a "false sense of security" for Iowa residents.

"This is very close to banishment," Mr. Ritchie said. "They quit registering with the sex offender registry and they start sleeping under bridges and at rest stops"

Back at the Ced-Rel motel, Kenneth Selzer, the owner, angrily defended his renters to a reporter, saying they caused little trouble to anyone, not to his neighbors, not to his wife, who sometimes worked late at the motel by herself.

Don Zeller, the sheriff here in Linn County, said however that he had heard a lot of concerns from people over sex offenders in the county, 30 of whom face charges for not complying with the state law's residency restrictions.

Before September, Sheriff Zeller said, he knew where 90 percent of Linn County's sex offenders were living, and today he knows where slightly more than half live. Just before Christmas, the sheriff said, one man began spending his days inside the sheriff's office because he had no where else to go.

We need teacher records to safeguard our children

Web-posted Mar 15, 2006

EDITORIALS

It turns out a lot of Michigan lawmakers still are wary of schoolteachers. A Senate majority of both Democrats and Republicans have seriously watered down a bill forcing disclosure of teacher criminal records. For example, it would limit public access to offenses that would cause dismissal. In contrast, a Houseapproved bill would mandate full public access to the criminal records of those who teach in our local classrooms.

Now there are attempts by Republican leaders to have the differences in the legislation resolved by a joint House-Senate conference committee. But there seems to be a real possibility that we could end up with no disclosure at all.

Nobody likes to have past mistakes made available for public scrutiny. However, we've learned that too many people in our schools have violated criminal laws. Once, the assumption was that people with such records were not being hired to teach and not kept on payrolls after being convicted.

It can be argued that many crimes are not the type that would be likely to have anything to do with classroom behavior or relations with children in general. And if personal rehabilitation after a conviction is to mean something, it means a restoration of trust.

But interested members of the community, especially parents, must have access to teacher criminal records so they can make their own judgments about whom they want teaching their children.

We'd have full disclosure now if it hadn't turned out that many teachers' criminal records were wrong. Some innocent educators were falsely accused. That's been straightened out, and it's a favor for teachers who otherwise might have faced falsehoods alone and without the resources to prove them wrong.

We're identified by our Social Security numbers, and many of them also are being used by immigrants who need them to get jobs. If such a person is convicted of a crime, a search may attach it to an innocent name. All criminal records, therefore, should be verified before being revealed.

That done, a person who works with children should have no problem with the disclosure of who and what they are. It is likely that most parents had assumed school districts checked applicants' backgrounds and acted accordingly as a matter of routine. But parents found out schools didn't in all cases or used poor judgment.

Parents should demand the right to see for themselves who's in the classrooms. This is not an attempt to embarrass people unnecessarily or to make a public spectacle of an unfortunate situation. The attempt is to have access to the knowledge we need to safeguard our children.

THE OAKLAND PRESS

House approves bills targeting child molesters, rapists

3/14/2006, 7:21 p.m. ET

By TIM MARTIN
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Since his daughter was sexually assaulted and killed a year ago, Florida resident Mark Lunsford has crisscrossed the country lobbying for tougher laws against sex offenders who target children.

He found a receptive audience Tuesday in Michigan.

Minutes after hearing Lunsford's testimony about his murdered 9-year-old daughter, a House panel unanimously voted to send bills targeting child molesters and rapists to the full chamber for consideration. The House then overwhelmingly passed the five-bill package, sending it to the Senate.

The bills call for a minimum 25-year sentence for anyone 17 or older convicted of first-degree criminal sexual conduct against a child under the age of 13.

Once offenders are released from prison, they would be required to be electronically tracked with the use of global positioning system technology. The monitoring would continue for life if they had been convicted of first- or second-degree criminal sexual conduct.

"If we put them in jail and keep them in jail, we will save lives," Lunsford told the House Judiciary Committee. "The child you save could be your own."

Lunsford's voice cracked with emotion as he began his testimony to lawmakers reliving his daughter Jessica's disappearance.

Investigators say Jessica Lunsford was abducted Feb. 23, 2005, and carried 150 yards to a mobile home her attacker shared with the other adults, where he raped her and then buried her alive in the yard. Investigators say a convicted sex offender confessed to the killing last March 18, the day before the third-grader's body was found stuffed into trash bags. He later pleaded not guilty and faces trial this summer.

Several states are looking at creating laws similar to what's known in Florida as Jessica's Law. That state now has longer sentences and the prospect of lifetime electronic monitoring for some sex offenders once they are released from prison.

Lunsford says he has been shocked to learn how many states have loopholes allowing convicted child molesters to serve relatively little time behind bars and to live in public without much monitoring from law enforcement officials.

Michigan was the 12th state Lunsford has visited to promote tougher laws. He plans to travel to all 50.

Michigan residents who were victims of sexual assault while children also testified before the House committee.

Child molesters and rapists often repeat their crimes, studies have shown. The sponsors of the Michigan bills — Rep. Phil Pavlov, R-St. Clair Township, and Rep. David Law, R-West Bloomfield — say the best way to prevent a repeat is to keep offenders behind bars and then electronically track them in "real time" once they're released.

Supporters say GPS tracking has significant advantages over Michigan's sex offender registry, which requires offenders to provide law enforcement officials with their addresses. Not all offenders comply with the registry's requirements.

The GPS function could add to the costs of the bill. Florida is budgeting about \$4 million this year for GPS equipment and about \$3 million for new prison beds. But other police and court costs could be reduced with fewer offenders coming back into the system for repeat offenses, Law said.

"It is an issue whose time is past due," Law said.

Democratic Rep. Pam Byrnes of Dexter also had introduced bills related to sex offender sentences and GPS tracking but those measures were introduced after some of the Republican bills and at the same time as others, and some of the content is different.

The main bill in the Republican-sponsored package — calling for the mandatory minimum of 25 years behind bars — passed the House 103-3. Detroit Democrats Marsha Cheeks, George Cushingberry and Steve Tobocman voted against the bill. Detroit Democrats Tupac Hunter and LaMar Lemmons III did not vote.

Tobocman said he has concerns about setting mandatory minimums for prison sentences. He said judges and juries should be given some latitude to decide sentences in cases, rather than the Legislature predetermining outcomes.

The other bills in the package passed by nearly identical votes.

The sex offender bills are House Bills 5421-22 and 5531-33.

Gongwer
March 14, 2006

JESSICA'S LAW' WINS HOUSE OK

The state would require a minimum 25-year prison sentence for sex offenders older than age 17 who violate a person under the age of 13 and those offenders would be subject to lifetime monitoring through a satellite tether under legislation passed by the House almost unanimously on Tuesday.

The legislation (HB 5421, HB 5422, HB 5531, HB 5532 and HB 5533) is referred to as Jessica's Law after the nine-year-old girl who was abducted, raped and killed in Florida. Her father, Mark Lunsford, provided testimony to the House Judiciary Committee earlier in the day.

"We depend on you people," he said. "You have to power to change this. I live with this everyday. All they had to do was change the law 20 years ago."

Mr. Lunsford said a sex offender who lived only 150 yards from his house abducted his daughter from their home. While police were tracking down all registered sex offenders in the area, the man was violating his daughter for three days and hid in a closet with her when police arrived. His friends said he was not at home and later her body was buried alive behind their house.

"If all of them had tracking devices on them it wouldn't have taken three weeks it would have taken a day," he said, adding that the sex offender had his tether removed after his parole had been completed months before.

Rep. David Law (R-Commerce Twp.), sponsor of three of the bills, said that statistics show that 52 percent of sex offenders released from jail will violate again. "An average pedophile leaves a string of victims at least 100. That is shocking. It's not going to be a cheap program, nor should it be if we are going to do it right."

Mr. Law said Florida is paying \$8 million per year to maintain a real-time tracking system, but there is no amount that can compare to protecting children. The legislation calls for a sex offender to pay for the lifetime monitoring if he or she is able to, otherwise the state would have to pay the costs.

And Rep. Phil Pavlov (R-St. Clair), sponsor of two of the bills, said although judges in Michigan serve in their capacity well, having a mandatory minimum is a clear-cut solution to a problem.

Although the legislation passed unanimously out of committee, three Democrats opposed passage of the bills on the House floor: Rep. George Cushingberry (D-Detroit) and Rep. Steve Tobocman (D-Detroit) and Rep. Marsha Cheeks (D-Detroit).

Mr. Tobocman said that voting against the legislation was difficult because everyone wants to make sure that children are protected from sex offenders, but he said it should be up to the courts and juries to determine the sentence of a violator. He also said the package had technical problems and the House should fix them before the package is sent to the Senate.

He also said that if people are such a risk to a community that they need to be tethered for their lives, than the appropriate authority should review whether that person should be in jail instead.

Medicare Drug Benefit Works, Bush Says

By Michael A. Fletcher Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 15, 2006; Page A04

CANANDAIGUA, N.Y., March 14 -- The problems that have plagued Medicare's prescription drug program since its rollout 10 weeks ago are being addressed, and the initiative is already showing signs of lowering drug costs for seniors, President Bush said Tuesday.

Traveling to this western New York town to kick off a two-day administration effort to promote the new benefit, Bush urged senior citizens to enroll. "It's a good deal," he said.

The widespread confusion created by the plan is now giving way to the plan's vision of lowering drug costs for senior citizens, Bush said. To date, 26 million senior citizens have signed up for the benefit. Not only has the benefit reduced drug costs for most enrollees, but federal costs for the plan are also running 20 percent lower than projected, he said.

"It's working," Bush said. "It makes a lot of sense."

The drug benefit went into effect on Jan. 1, immediately igniting a chorus of complaints from senior citizen groups that said the plan was so complex that it left seniors confused.

Administrative problems temporarily left some seniors with no drug coverage.

Some pharmacists, meanwhile, say they have been losing money under the plan and have complained that they are struggling to remain solvent because of slow payments from Medicare.

"As with any program and new benefit this big, there are going to be some transition issues," said Mark B. McClellan, who heads Medicare. ". . . We found problems, and we fixed them."

As a result, he said, Medicare is giving shorter wait times for people who call in with questions about coverage, pharmacies have more complete information in their billing systems and people are using their coverage more effectively.

Canandaigua is a small, picturesque town about 45 minutes outside Rochester, amid the vineyards and glacially carved lakes and hillsides of the Finger Lakes region. Bush spoke at Canandaigua Academy, a public high school whose alumni include Abraham Lincoln's debater Stephen A. Douglas, and then visited the Ferris Hills at West Lake Senior Center. After returning to the White House, Bush met with representatives of groups working to educate seniors about the drug plan.

The Bush administration has touted the menu of choices available to seniors under the drug program as central to its promise, saying the competition lowers prices. Seniors have dozens of plans, featuring different benefit and cost structures, to choose from.

Many Democrats have been critical of the plan, saying the administration has botched its rollout and set it up so that the program is a boon mainly to big health care providers.

"The Medicare drug program has been a nightmare for America's seniors and is clear evidence of the Bush administration's shocking incompetence," said Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.).

The drug benefit is the most dramatic expansion of coverage in Medicare's history. It is being offered through private health insurance companies.

"It was a difficult transition for a lot of people," said Diane Lawatsch, pharmacy operations manager at Wegmans Food Markets Inc., who joined Bush on the stage at the town-hall-style event here. "The first several weeks were pretty bumpy."

Bush urged senior citizens, particularly those who have low incomes, to look into the drug benefit. Despite an expensive government outreach effort, only a small fraction of the 8 million low-income seniors eligible for the plan have signed up.

"If you're a low-income senior, the government's going to pick up a significant portion of your tab," Bush said. "If you're an average-income senior, you're going to see your drug bills cut in half. If you're a taxpayer, the anticipated costs are significantly lower than we thought."

At the Rochester airport, Bush met with Jason McElwain, the 17-year-old manager of his high school basketball team. McElwain, who is autistic, won national notice last month when his coach suited him up for the final home game of the season and he scored 20 points in four minutes.

Bush noted that "the country was captivated by an amazing story on the basketball court."

Bush Admits Rocky Start to Drug Plan

By DAVID E. SANGER
The New York Times

Published: March 15, 2006

CANANDAIGUA, N.Y., March 14 — President Bush tried on Tuesday to tamp down complaints by retirees and pharmacists about the start of the Medicare prescription drug benefit, acknowledging that problems plagued its early days.

In an echo of speeches conceding errors in the responses to Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq reconstruction, and in which he insisted that the problems were being resolved, Mr. Bush told a group of pharmacists and Medicare participants here that he had expected that the program would have a rocky start.

"Any time Washington passes a new law, sometimes the transition period can be interesting," the president said.

That was something of an understatement. The White House was flooded with complaints about retirees who could not obtain their drugs at the promised discount, and independent pharmacists from Texas complained in recent days to Karl Rove, the president's deputy chief of staff and political strategist, that they had been forced to give out millions of dollars of prescription drugs and had not been reimbursed.

Mr. Rove was on the trip to this city, not far from Rochester, which Mr. Bush hailed as an example of a place that had straightened out the problems. He noted several programs were available to explain Medicare options.

"Take a look," Mr. Bush said to a group with many retirees. "One of the reasons I have come is to ask people who are eligible for Medicare just to explore the options."

The president also traveled here to sidestep a potential landmine. Democrats, who voted overwhelmingly against the drug program and have called it a giveaway to drug companies, hope to point to the troubles in enrolling beneficiaries in November.

Mr. Bush took with him Dr. Mark B. McClellan, administrator of the Federal Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, who has been working to resolve the troubles that many patients have encountered. "We saw some long wait times," Dr. McClellan said.

Calls to 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) had just a few minutes of waiting, he said. White House officials said the availability of generic drugs had lowered the projected cost of the program, which is run by private health plans subsidized by Medicare.

Foster youths aim to make a difference for others like them

By Ryan Bentley News-Review Staff Writer

Friday, March 10, 2006 1:50 PM EST

For youth from any background, the transition to adult life can involve many demanding tasks.

Finding a job, financing a college education and lining up housing are just a few examples. And for youth in foster care - who often find themselves on their own just as they turn 18 - few adults may be available to guide them.

Using grants obtained from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, the Michigan Department of Human Services is developing programs to help foster youth move toward life on their own.

Human services officials pursued the Casey initiative in response to some adverse circumstances which often impact the youth "aging out" of foster care.

"The idea is to prepare them a little bit more for being on their own than just (saying) 'You're 18, see ya,'" said Norvilla Bennett, a Traverse City-based local coordinator for the Casey initiative. "This is a population that is flying under the radar and creating statistics of homelessness and lack of sustainability."

Nationally, the Casey organization has observed that less than 50 percent of foster youth have graduated from high-school four years after leaving the care system. For the entire U.S. population ages 18-24, the high-school completion rate is 85 percent. Casey also noted that 25 percent of youth have experienced a period of homelessness within four years of departing foster care, and that 65 percent have not been able to maintain employment for a year.

The "Opportunity Passport," which involves bank accounts to help youth save for their future needs, is the key component of the program. Michigan's Casey initiative provides a bit of seed money as well as dollar-for-dollar matches on long-term savings - up to \$1,000 yearly - for foster youth ages 14 and up. Adults 23 and younger who have previously spent time with foster families are eligible as well.

For shorter-term, personal needs, youth in the program are provided with separate savings accounts.

"What we're teaching them is long-term savings habits," said Shannon Brower, a Department of Human Services consultant and Good Hart resident. "It takes income to get by, but it takes assets to get ahead."

About 40 foster youth around Emmet, Charlevoix and Antrim counties have Opportunity Passport accounts.

The state's transition program also lets foster-care enrollees get involved with a network of youth boards. These are designed to offer a channel for advocacy on foster-care issues and to help youth form supportive relationships with peers. Youth are paid stipends for their service in some of these activities.

Petoskey High School senior Ashley Miller - who's spent about a year and half in foster care - has found the Casey initiative helpful in more ways than one.

Ashley, who has plans to enroll at Central Michigan University this fall, said the program exposed her to scholarships and other financial-aid possibilities. With two part-time jobs, she's trying to save money for a car purchase - and appreciates the matching funds available for her individual development account.

"It helps a lot," she said. "I've become more responsible with money."

Ashley said the foster care system generally has served her well. She maintains contact with her birth parents and an older sister, and her current foster family seems willing to help her out even after high school.

Still, Ashley believes it's important to advocate for better opportunities for foster youth in general. She serves on a statewide panel focusing on educational opportunities, and has had the opportunity to speak with legislators in Lansing about foster-care issues.

"Just being able to present some of our problems to the legislators has been a big step, making them aware of us," she said.

Through the Casey initiative, Ashley also had the chance to visit Baltimore for a national conference in which youth discussed foster care trends in their home states.

In Northern Michigan, youth boards exist in Petoskey, Traverse City and Cadillac. About 30 youth participate in these panels.

Michigan's Casey program also works to line up sources of support for foster youth in the community. Businesses, for example, sometimes give priority hiring consideration to the youth or offer them special promotions. Several colleges have streamlined their enrollment process for Casey participants.

"We see lots of room for businesses to be involved," Bennett said

Michigan is now in the third - and final - year of a Casey grant which provides \$800,000 annually. The program currently serves youth in a 10-county area of Northern Michigan, along with seven more counties downstate.

Once this grant expires, Casey has agreed to provide a lesser degree of financial support to the state for three more years. By 2009, DHS hopes to have other funding sources lined up and extend the program statewide.

“We have been extremely pleased with the progress of our Michigan site,” Casey spokeswoman Carla Owens said. “They have not only helped to build assets for youth transitioning from care, but they have also helped to transform the child welfare system by making legislative recommendations and policy changes to DHS, the legislature, the court system and the governor.”

Ryan Bentley can be contacted at 439-9342, or rbentley@petoskeynews.com

Dad's suit over child 'frivolous'

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

JEAN SPENNER
THE SAGINAW NEWS

The lawsuit against her is foolish, says the Saginaw Township woman whose former boyfriend doesn't want to support their child.

Lauren Wells broke her silence Tuesday to denounce the suit and express her disappointment in Matt Dubay, also of Saginaw Township.

"The direct and indirect disruption caused by this frivolous legal action must end," Wells said in a written statement her Saginaw attorney, Lawrence William "Bill" Smith, released Tuesday.

Wells, 20, who is attending college and works for a wireless phone company, has declined personal interviews.

Wells and Dubay, 25, a computer technician, have an 8-month-old daughter, Elisabeth.

Dubay on Thursday filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Bay City against Wells, who gave birth to a child he did not want. The National Center for Men, a men's rights organization based in Long Island, N.Y., also is filing the lawsuit.

Wells, who gave one brief interview before declining numerous media requests, said she hopes the court quickly dismisses the action.

"I believe life begins at conception and blossoms," she said. "I take responsibility for my acts and will do my best as an adult and mother to protect and provide for our daughter.

Elisabeth is a "vibrant, healthy baby" who is "loved dearly, and although her father has chosen not to participate in her life since conception, Elisabeth deserves financial support from her father," Wells said.

Wells and Dubay must take responsibility for their actions, she said, adding that the ideal of providing a cohesive two-parent home is not possible in this instance.

"My focus is on providing a nurturing home for our baby," Wells said. "I am disappointed that Matt has decided not to participate in Elisabeth's life so far and has instead chosen to contest any responsibility from our consensual actions."

The Saginaw County Friend of the Court has ordered Dubay to pay \$500 a month in child support to Wells and their daughter.

Dubay claims that Wells knew he didn't want to have a child with her and assured him repeatedly that, because of a physical condition, she could not get pregnant.

Saginaw County court files show that Dubay acknowledged paternity Aug. 24.

Dubay has said he doesn't expect the suit to succeed but wants to spark debate. His suit contends that the lack of male reproductive rights violates the U.S. Constitution's equal protection clause.

State courts have ruled in the past that any inequity experienced by men is outweighed by society's interest in ensuring that children get financial support from two parents.

The lawsuit already has a nickname -- Roe v. Wade for Men, a take-off on the landmark 1973 Supreme Court ruling establishing a woman's right to have an abortion.

Women's groups have objected to that comparison, but National Center for Men Director Mel Feit insists it is apt.

"Roe says a woman can choose to have intimacy and still have control over subsequent consequences," he said. "No one has ever asked a federal court if that means men should have some similar say."

Jean Spenner is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach her at 776-9683.

Teen Could Face Terrorism Charges For School Threat

Boy's Plans Allegedly Included Bombing School Cafeteria

POSTED: 8:29 am EST March 15, 2006

A sophomore at Center Line High School is expected to face terrorism charges, Local 4 reported. The 16-year-old boy told classmates that he was planning to murder the high school's public safety officer, and kill students by bombing the school's cafeteria, police said. Investigators also discovered writings by the boy that were violent in nature, Local 4 reported. The boy's motivation for the alleged threats is unknown. His name has not been released. The Warren teenager has been suspended while police and school officials investigate, according to a report in *The Macomb Daily*. He could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted of terrorism charges.

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Lansing State Journal Letters

March 15, 2006

Highfields succeeds

Many thanks are due Chairman Charles Corley (Forum, March 5) and Highfields Inc.'s current board for their exemplary efforts to resolve recent issues so its missions can continue.

This expression of gratitude is compounded by the thousands who have made possible, sustained and enriched Highfields programs: county supervisors, commissioners, service clubs, unions, businesses, professional organizations and auxiliaries, foundations - and the generous contributions of time, skills and resources of scores of individuals, including boards of directors and dedicated staff over the past 45 years. It has been a community of effort to meet a community need.

From 50 years of juvenile court experience, which included local and state levels, I am convinced half of those in Michigan's record-setting prison population would be leading self-satisfying, productive lives with commensurate reductions in crime and corrections budgets if there were more Highfields.

Robert L. Drake
Okemos

Food Stamp Sign-Ups Low in N.Y. Shortfall Exists Despite a Rising Demand for Provisions

By Michael Powell Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 15, 2006; Page A17

NEW YORK -- Amid cans of kidney beans and bags of white rice, Denise Conyers sits in her wheelchair at a Manhattan food pantry, plotting to keep the hunger at bay for one more day. Her food stamp allotment just got cut. She is really not sure why -- she has not been able to work for 20 years.

"It was hard getting food stamps in the first place; they kept asking for more and more paperwork," said Conyers, a fine-cheekboned 53-year-old who was long ago disabled by multiple sclerosis. "Then they said that I make too much on SSI [Supplemental Security Income], so they're cutting my monthly food stamp dollars."

Snarls of red tape, bureaucratic resistance to a "welfare program" and the fact that many New Yorkers are not aware of food stamps have depressed participation here in the federal program. Overall, about 700,000 poor New York residents, more than the entire population of the District, are eligible for food stamps but not enrolled.

New York state ranks 36th in the nation in the percentage of eligible people participating in the program, a low-performing tier that includes some of the nation's most populous states, from Texas and Florida to California and Massachusetts.

The shortfall occurs against a backdrop of rising demand for emergency food in New York and across the nation. Food pantries such as that run by the Westside Campaign Against Hunger -- where Conyers was interviewed -- report a 40 percent spike in demand in the past five years. This speaks to the paradox of New York. This largest of cities has the densest concentration of millionaires in the nation -- yet 21 percent of the residents live below the poverty line, and some walk the razor edge of hunger.

"Working poor people and immigrants are the fastest-growing groups in New York, and we're failing them," said Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger. "It's a daily shame."

It also costs New York a small fortune in federal aid. Several recent studies estimate that if 500,000 more New Yorkers signed up for food stamps, it would, in effect, pour \$650 million in federal dollars into local supermarkets and bodegas.

"Hundreds of thousands of low-income New Yorkers miss out on nutrition . . . and the City loses out on hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid," noted a recent study by the Urban Justice Center, a New York-based advocacy group that studied the program for a year.

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg (R) has vowed to boost food stamp participation. And the number of New Yorkers enrolled for food stamps has increased 30 percent since he took office in 2002. But the mayor has come late to his embrace of food stamps. Many innovations touted by his administration -- such as allowing applicants to file by computer and fax, and streamlining the application -- are common practice elsewhere, even in more conservative states such as Oklahoma, Alaska and Tennessee.

Former mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani (R) was fond of describing food stamps as a strand in the web of welfare dependency. And the number of New Yorkers receiving food stamps fell by 700,000 during the former mayor's tenure, the sharpest drop in city history.

But federal judges and U.S. Department of Agriculture investigators found that Giuliani-era caseworkers routinely and illegally denied food stamps to tens of thousands of poor people. Giuliani's critique still echoes in national conservative circles. Analyst Jeffrey M. Jones wrote in the most recent issue of the Hoover Institution's in-house magazine that food stamps contribute to overeating, and he argued for "retaining a stigma [about food stamps] historically associated with welfare."

"When Rudy was mayor . . . the ultimate goal was to get people off of any welfare benefit," said Patricia M. Smith, a deputy commissioner at the city's Human Resources Administration.

"Mayor Bloomberg has gone out of his way to say that food stamps are not welfare."

In fact, Bloomberg, who was endorsed by Giuliani, has been cautious about reversing his predecessor's policies. His administration has declined to seek a state waiver that would allow jobless single adults to receive food stamps for more than three months in any three-year period. And New York state, with support from Bloomberg, is one of just four states in the nation that fingerprints food stamp applicants.

"Rudy chose to apply his policies of intimidation to food stamps," said Harvey Robins, a former top welfare official under former mayor Edward I. Koch (D). "If Bloomberg is truly serious about hunger, he should stop fingerprinting and see what happens."

To talk with working-poor New Yorkers in food pantries is to hear of people snared in a bureaucratic maze of waiting lines, lost applications and improper denials. (New York still has one of the highest rates of mistaken denial of food stamp claims in the nation.)

Julia Guillen cleans out airplanes at La Guardia Airport. She earns \$7 an hour and lives with two sons and an 8-year-old grandson. In October 2004, she applied for food stamps.

She missed an appointment, and a caseworker closed her case. Then she could not find a bank statement. Then they wanted paperwork proof of child support. (Guillen moved twice in the year she applied for stamps, sometimes sleeping on her mother's floor -- 42 percent of food stamp recipients spend more than half their income on rent.)

On and on it went. Today she receives food stamps, but she is feeling none too secure about it.

"It seemed like they made everything impossible."

Advocates agree with city officials that a public benefit cannot be given away willy-nilly. But they add that a city such as New York, with its social democratic traditions, should not make it so arduous for the poor to find food.

"We are hurting the very people who are choosing work as their lifestyle," said Robins, the former welfare official. "New York created the social safety net, and we should be leading the way in re-stitching it."

Food giveaway planned

HOMETOWN HEADLINES

FLINT

THE FLINT JOURNAL

FIRST EDITION

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By George Jaksa

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FLINT - Food will be distributed while supplies last from 10 a.m.-1 p.m. March 30 in the parking lot of Court Street United Methodist Church, 225 W. Court St., sponsored by Crossover Downtown Outreach and Court Street United Methodist Church.

Seniors are targets of latest round of scams

By Michael P. McConnell

Daily Tribune Staff Writer

PUBLISHED: March 15, 2006

FERNDALDE — Ferndale police are warning residents to beware of scam artists after an 84-year-old man was bilked out of \$1,200.

The man contacted police Monday after he was tricked by mail into sending a check to a Canadian address in order to collect bogus lottery winnings of \$750,000.

"We probably get a case like this every month now," said Ferndale Detective Sgt. Patrick Jones.

"The victims are usually senior citizens and they respond to scams they receive by e-mail or regular mail."

The man sent \$1,200 to an address in Ottawa after the scam artists told him he had to pay Canadian custom's fees and tax before he could receive his winnings.

"People need to understand that if they legitimately win something, they don't have to pay money to collect winnings," Jones said. "They also should know they aren't going to win contests or lotteries that they never entered in the first place."

Last year Ferndale police were able warn a senior citizen of a scam before she paid out any money. The woman received a phone call from a man pretending to be a customs official who told her she would have to pay tax and fees to collect winnings from a Spanish lottery, police said. The woman contacted police instead.

Another popular scam involves people being solicited to cash checks in exchange for a 10 percent pay out for foreign companies which purport they are unable to cash them in the United States.

"One guy recently had contacts from different entities in London, China and Nigeria," said Ferndale Detective Brendan Moore. "The checks are counterfeit and when people cash them at their banks they end up being responsible for the full amount."

Police warn that people should ignore any mail or e-mail from anyone claiming to have lottery winnings from overseas or want them to cash checks.

"It's all a scam to rip people off," Moore said. "You just don't get free money; it doesn't work that way."

Group's goal: Housing for all homeless in 10 years

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By Jeff Alexander
MUSKEGON CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

A group of community leaders Tuesday announced a bold plan to end homelessness in Muskegon County by 2016.

It's an ambitious goal, but officials involved in the effort said they will pull it off by changing the way social service agencies assist the chronically homeless.

A coalition of social service agencies plans to attack the problem by getting homeless individuals and families into permanent housing much faster than in the past.

Under the current system, the chronically homeless are shuttled between emergency shelters and transitional housing for two to three years before they are placed in permanent housing.

"We can't afford to have solutions that take three years to provide (housing) stability," said Jane Johnson, director of the state Department of Human Services office in Muskegon. "We'll house people first and then help them solve their other problems."

Muskegon's effort is similar to an initiative started last year by the city of Grand Rapids and Kent County. Officials there also hope to end homelessness in 10 years.

On any given day, there are an estimated 792 homeless people in Muskegon -- 394 of them children, according to government data. Of those 792 individuals, 126 are chronically homeless, which means they are living on the streets, in shelters or regularly moving from one temporary residence to another.

Grand Rapids Mayor George Heartwell spoke to a group of about 60 social service providers Tuesday to kick off Muskegon's effort to end homelessness by 2016.

"We got into this problem of homelessness relatively quickly and we can solve the problem quickly if there is a community will to do it," Heartwell said.

The number of homeless families in America soared in the early 1980s, Heartwell said, when former President Ronald Reagan's administration "eviscerated" funding for the department of Housing and Urban Development. Funding for HUD, the primary source of assistance for the homeless, has been reduced by every presidential administration since Reagan, Heartwell said. Federal budget cuts for subsidized housing have left cities and states largely on their own to deal with the homeless, Heartwell said. Bolstering the safety net for the homeless will require support of local, county and state agencies, as well as faith-based organizations and philanthropists, he said.

Johnson said homeless individuals often need help dealing with other issues, such as substance abuse and mental illness, before they can hold a job and pay for housing.

Muskegon County has received \$2.3 million in state funds over the past three years to develop programs that provide housing for the chronically homeless.

The county expects to receive another \$1 million state grant this spring to provide long-term housing subsidies for 55 chronically homeless individuals. The grant will pay the rent for three years in one-bedroom houses or apartments, according to county officials.

Members of the Muskegon County Homelessness Continuum of Care Network said they will aggressively pursue their vision for tackling homelessness, which states: "In 10 years, all individuals and families facing homelessness in Muskegon County will have access to safe, decent, affordable housing and the resources and support needed to sustain it."

Heartwell and Johnson said homelessness is a complex problem. But they said the simplest, quickest way to help the homeless get back on their feet financially is to provide long-term housing as quickly as possible.

"Will we completely end homelessness? No, there will always be some homeless people,"

Heartwell said. "Can we end homelessness as we know it today -- can we end homelessness for families? Absolutely."

Homelessness is an issue that affects everyone, whether they realize it or not, Heartwell said. Some examples:

- * The poor get sick more often than the average American, which drives up health-care costs for everyone.

- * Homeless children perform poorly in school and develop serious illnesses more often than other children, which creates a drain on school budgets.

- * The homeless spend more time in jail, which is a huge drain on government budgets. A University of Texas study found that each homeless adult costs taxpayers \$14,480 annually, primarily for overnight jail costs.

Providing one bed for a homeless person in an emergency shelter costs about \$8,000 more per year than providing a long-term housing subsidy, according to federal data.

Heartwell said he believes Americans have a moral responsibility to provide shelter for the homeless.

"Somehow, I think our national soul is at stake here," he said. "None of us should be content to have a full belly while some children in our communities go hungry."

Overall, she's a good volunteer

Wednesday, March 15, 2006

By Shannon Maynard
For the Citizen Patriot

Trisha Overall had volunteered with several organizations in Jackson before she found Community Action Agency's tax assistance program.

"I just didn't enjoy (prior volunteer work). This is my passion," Overall said. "There are a lot of people out there that volunteer. I found my own niche."

Volunteers in Tax Assistance is a program in which low-income, elderly and handicapped individuals can receive help with their tax preparation and e-filing.

Overall, 41, sees the program as one that brings awareness to the people who need the tax help.

"It's a way to tap in on that market," she said. "(The low-income and elderly) do have credits, but if they don't know where to go to get them, they lose out."

Overall trained and practiced preparing taxes in January. From February to April, she will spend two nights a week working with those who need assistance.

Although she had no formal tax-preparation training, Overall had been helping friends and family with their taxes for seven years. She also feels her 20-plus years of experience in the computer industry has been valuable to her work with VITA.

"I'm a computer person, and all I'm doing is putting information into the computer," she said.

Overall said she has enjoyed meeting a variety of people during her two years with VITA.

"I have the opportunity to meet different types of people from different walks of life, both people who I do taxes for and other volunteers," she said.

Overall also has found her tax work with friends and family is much different than the volunteer work she is doing now.

"When it's family, you know them. Sometimes you don't know how to ask questions to a stranger," she said. "They have to feel comfortable with you and not intimidated. That can be a challenge."

For Overall, serving in the community wasn't something she could avoid.

It was something she knew she had to do.

"I was always taught, if you learn you should teach, and if you have you should give," she said.

Overall has one son and has lived in Jackson for the past 10 years.

ESCANABA - YAP has reason to be proud.

Escanaba Daily Press

March 15, 2006

The Youth Assistance Program (YAP) is probably one of the few organizations in the world that spends 99.99 percent of its budget on children.

This fact was made known at the YAP annual board meeting held in mid-February.

With expenses totaling \$50,662.07 in 2005, it was reported that \$50,402 was spent directly on needy children in Delta County, helping 575 children. The only operating expenses for the year were mailing, printing expenses, and insurance, totaling \$260.30.

"That means that .005 percent of our budget was spent on operating expenses, while 99.995 percent was spent directly on the children," said Lynn Mariin, chairperson of YAP. "We are able to practice such good stewardship, because YAP is an all volunteer agency, made up completely of volunteers. All the work is done by the board and friends. There are no paid staff and therefore no paid benefits, and no rent payment, leaving YAP with no other major expenses."

YAP's office, along with phone and utilities, is donated by Raymond James Investments.

Since its humble beginnings in 1988, YAP has been able to distribute over \$305,000 to more than 3,600 disadvantaged children in Delta County. All the funds spent throughout the year are raised locally.

"It is truly amazing," said Sandy Hereau, financial officer for YAP. "Over the years the community has been very generous. This year we raised \$50,862. Over \$20,000 came from our two main fund-raisers which are a yearly dance and auction and the Gray Jeweler's Golf Outing which the Hirn and Darmogray families tirelessly organize each year. Another \$5,000 came from a Hannahville 2 percent grant, and the rest of the funds came from very generous individuals, organizations, local industry and churches."

Throughout the year YAP disperses mini-grants up to \$100 a year to needy Delta county school-aged children. Those working with the children, such as teachers, social workers, counselors, probation officers, nurses, aides, etc. apply for the grants on behalf of the children. They have to verify legitimate financial need and justify how the money will be used to help the children.

Children and families cannot apply directly.

Summer camp programs, winter clothing, school clothes, sports equipment, medical expenses, field trips, opportunity to participate in extra curricular activities, and incentive programs are just a few of the areas where children are helped.

Yap also sponsors three separate Christmas parties for 90 needy children during the holiday season, which includes Christmas gifts and stockings for the children, along with mittens and hats for the younger children. Gifts are also purchased for their family members. The children are taken shopping by volunteers.

"Over the past couple of years we have had to lower our grant amounts from \$150 to \$125, and eventually down to \$100", said Cheryl Smith, vice chairperson. "This is because the requests continue to grow every year, and we dislike saying no to any legitimate request. We hope that we can raise more funds so our mini-grants can keep up with inflation, and we can continue to fund the growing number of applications. Parents of children know how expensive clothing can be, and \$100 doesn't go as far as it used to."

According to Smith, because of a shakey economy and the rise in health care costs and unemployment, the number of youngsters in need increases every year.

"We hope people continue to remember us, support us, and feel a part of this heartfelt community effort," Smith said.

Those wishing to make a contribution can send it to: YAP, c/o Raymond James Investments, 812 Ludington Street, Escanaba, Michigan.

Published March 15, 2006

Coalition urges added sales taxes for services Group wants more funds for child care, programs

By Stacey Range
Lansing State Journal

Advocates for children and families called Tuesday for expanding Michigan's sales tax to include more services as a way to help pay for early childhood care and other human services programs.

The Michigan Coalition for Children and Families said state lawmakers have cut too much from programs for at-risk residents when they need it most. They also said lawmakers are focusing on short-term actions at the expense of future workers.

"We know what happens to bridges and roads when we don't take care of them. They crumble. And the same thing happens to our human infrastructure," said Bill Long, a local attorney and co-chair of the group of 70 representatives of child welfare, human services, health, education, law enforcement, child care and mental health services. Long also is a community representative on the LSJ editorial board.

The coalition wants more funding for prenatal care, child care, parenting education, respite care for families of special needs children, before- and after-school programs, mental health care and more.

Support has grown around the Capitol to modernize Michigan's tax system to reflect a service-oriented society. One proposal calls for lowering the 6 percent sales tax to 4.5 percent or 5 percent before broadening it to include all services. Few current office-holders endorse the idea, and the business community generally opposes it.

"It would negatively impact families by raising the cost of a haircut, going to the movie theater, going bowling," said Rich Studley of the Michigan Chamber of Commerce. "It's remarkably bad tax policy."

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Gongwer
March 14, 2006

CAPITAL NOTEBOOK

CHILDREN'S AGENDA 2006: Michigan's Children released Tuesday its legislative agenda for the coming year. Among the group's priorities:

- Early prenatal care;
- Parenting education;
- More childcare subsidies;
- Expanded access to health care, through public and private insurance as well as through school and community health clinics;
- Quality education based upon a child's needs;
- Drug abuse prevention and treatment services; and
- Expanded evaluation and treatment of mental health needs for children and youth.

The group also argued that the state needs to address ongoing budget deficits. "The needs of Michigan's children and families continue to grow, yet current expenditures and existing resources do not fully address the infrastructure necessary to support a health and productive workforce," the group said in an open letter to the governor and the Legislature. Among the proposals for new revenue is continuing the state estate tax, increasing the alcohol tax and expanding the sales tax to certain services.

Bill to raise pay heads to Granholm

Minimum wage would jump 44%

March 15, 2006

BY DAWSON BELL

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

LANSING -- Legislation to raise the minimum wage in Michigan by 44% over the next two years is on its way to Gov. Jennifer Granholm after sweeping through the Legislature in blitzkrieg fashion.

Granholm has said she will sign the bill, which the state House approved Tuesday by a vote of 73-43. The state Senate approved it unanimously five days earlier.

But the bipartisan coalition that formed around the plan -- which raises the wage from \$5.15 to \$6.95 an hour in October, then to \$7.15 an hour in July 2007, and then to \$7.40 an hour in July 2008 -- was anything but unified about why the plan was a good idea.

Democrats, who have been pushing for an increase for several years, said it would help struggling families and the economy as low-wage earners spend their raises. But many Republicans said minimum-wage earners are predominantly young, unskilled single people -- some of whom won't be able to get jobs because of higher mandated wages.

Some of the Republicans who supported the plan said they did so largely because the alternative -- a union-backed ballot proposal to raise the minimum wage to \$6.85 an hour Jan. 1 -- is worse. Polls show voters overwhelmingly favor a minimum-wage hike.

Granholm and many Democrats who voted for the raise Tuesday said they will continue to support the ballot proposal to amend the state constitution to include the minimum wage and call for the wage to be adjusted annually for inflation.

House Minority Leader Dianne Byrum, D-Onondaga, said Tuesday's vote "sends the signal that Michigan values hard work."

Byrum said she didn't believe the measure would have any negative effect on job creation.

House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi, disagreed.

"Jobs will be lost because of the vote we took today," he said. But the legislation, pushed by majority Republicans in both the House and Senate, is a "much more responsible" approach than the ballot proposal, DeRoche said.

Tricia Kinley, tax policy director at the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, was less charitable. A huge increase in the minimum wage sends a dangerously wrong signal about Michigan, she said, that would only be made worse by a ballot proposal to put it in the constitution.

"It seems like the Democrats and the AFL-CIO are doing their best to try and drive the state into the ground," she said.

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Min. wage hike good idea

The hundreds of area workers earning minimum wage or slightly more may soon get a hefty raise thanks to a bill making its way through the Michigan Legislature, which heads off a ballot initiative currently underway.

The State Senate passed a measure Thursday that would raise the minimum wage from the current \$5.15 an hour to \$6.95 on Oct. 1, \$7.15 on July 1, 2007, and \$7.40 on July 1, 2008. The House has indicated it will approve the measure and forward it to the governor for her signature. The dozens of area businesses that employ low-wage workers may be looking at the Republican-controlled Legislature right about now and scratching their heads. After all, Republicans have long supported the position that raising the minimum wage would hurt the very population it is supposed to help by eliminating entry-level jobs and/or increasing the price of goods as employment costs are passed on to consumers, thereby eroding the buying power of poor people even further.

Supporters of the hike argue it is inhumane to expect working families to survive on \$5.15 an hour in a country where the average hourly wage in 2005 is more than three times that figure. More than 7 million people work at jobs in the United States that pay less than \$7 an hour.

Although we share the concerns of small business owners and empathize with their dilemma, we have to support the Legislature's action and encourage Gov. Jennifer Granholm to sign the bill into law. Michigan workers last saw an increase in the minimum wage in 1997. Even Wal-Mart, the alleged purveyor of plentiful but poorly-paid jobs, starts workers at well above minimum wage.

The market will bear the increase, probably passing it on to the rest of us who make decent salaries and give patronage to the businesses that employ low-wage workers such restaurants and motels.

But the extra \$3,744 a minimum wage worker will earn a year under this proposed law will go a long way to help them afford better housing, utilities and nutritional food, the staples of life in America.

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GOP backs wage increase? Why now?

Tuesday, March 14, 2006

Kalamazoo Gazette Editorial

Michigan Republican lawmakers are backing a large increase in the state's minimum wage, from the current \$5.15 an hour to \$6.95 an hour in October and \$7.40 an hour the following July.

Another sign of an impending apocalypse?

No, it's just an election year.

Republicans in Lansing know that most businesses don't want an increase in the minimum wage. But last week, Senate Republicans, joined by their Democratic colleagues, unanimously passed a bill that would increase the minimum wage by an astonishing 35 percent in October and a total of 43 percent by July 2007.

To what should we attribute such sudden generosity?

Could it be the fact that Democrats are working to place a constitutional amendment to increase the minimum wage to \$6.85 on the November state ballot?

This proposal not only appears to be pretty popular with voters, it also might bring Democratic-leaning voters to the polls in droves. That's something Republicans don't need in an election year when the entire state Legislature is up for re-election, as is Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm, Republican state Attorney General Mike Cox, Republican Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land, Democratic U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow and the entire U.S. House delegation.

Republican strategists are already worried enough as it is about an anti-affirmative action measure on the November ballot that might help propel Democratic sympathizers to the polls.

Affirmative action and a minimum wage increase on the November ballot may be more than Republican candidates can handle this fall.

State Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema told Gongwer News Service last week that it wasn't his intention, in supporting the bill last week, to depress Democratic turnout in November.

Instead, he said, the Democratic-led ballot proposal effort "kind of focused my thinking" about the minimum wage, which has not been increased in nine years. Sikkema said he considered it bad public policy to enshrine a minimum-wage increase, along with a mandate for annual cost of living adjustments, in the state Constitution, when that decision should be made by the Legislature and governor.

We agree there are certain issues and duties that should be decided by elected officials and not engraved in constitutional stone. The minimum wage is one of them.

But we also urge the Congress to increase the federal minimum wage and index future minimum wage increases to the cost of living.

That way, minimum-wage workers would see the kind of pay increases they need and Michigan would not put itself at a disadvantage when compared to neighboring states.

March 14, 2006

MINIMUM WAGE HIKE NEARS WITH HOUSE VOTE

Michigan employees being paid the minimum wage would see a hike in compensation, as the House passed legislation Tuesday approving an increase as that would go into effect after the governor's signature is assigned to the provision.

SB 318 won approval on 73-34 votes, with 24 Republicans voting along with 49 Democrats in support of the measure. The House ordered immediate effect on the bill, which has to be concurred in by the Senate before going to Governor Jennifer Granholm, who will sign the bill, her spokesperson said.

And, "the petition drive continues," said Jason Moon, spokesperson for the Michigan Democratic Party.

Having the matter on the ballot was seen as a huge way to get voters to turnout to the polls. The ballot proposal would tie the rise to the rate of inflation and the bill does not (although it does provide a bigger boost overall).

Democrats seeing the vote as a major win for their agenda stood up and clapped after the votes were declared. "People understand you cannot get by on \$5.15," said Rep. Fred Miller (D-Mount Clemens). "There's been a lot of talk to reforming welfare. If you want to get people off welfare you have to make work pay."

Rep. Andy Meisner (D-Ferndale) said that 40 percent of the people earning minimum wage are the main breadwinner in their family. "I'm glad, for whatever reason, we are doing a good thing for the people of this state."

And House Minority Leader Dianne Byrum (D-Onondaga) thanked a tireless caucus and public pressure for giving minimum wage workers more in their paychecks. "It's a big win for Democrats and a big win for workers. It's an economic stimulus from the bottom up."

With more money, workers will turn around and put that toward groceries and gas – boosting the state's economy, she said.

Republicans who voted in support of the legislation summarized the proposal they had previously called a jobs-killer as less of one compared to the constitutional ballot proposal, which would have tied the hike to inflation.

“Jobs will be lost because of the vote today, but far fewer jobs and for a shorter range,” said House Speaker Craig DeRoche (R-Novi). The vote shows the Legislature can respond and that a ballot proposal is no longer needed, he said.

Rep. Bill Huizenga (R-Zeeland) tried to amend the bill twice to allow employees who are younger than 18 years of age to make \$1 less than the minimum wage and also allow universities and colleges to pay employee students at a rate of 85 percent of the minimum wage. “I cannot in good conscience vote for a measure that does not factor in the purpose of entry-level work for students trying to gain experience and save some extra funds,” he said.

For Rep. Roger Kahn (R-Saginaw), who was one of the 24 Republicans to support the bill, said the for him, “It’s about people and not politics.”

Mr. DeRoche emphasized that he hoped with Wednesday’s vote to repeal the Single Business Tax that more businesses will add jobs in the state.

Here’s how the vote went down:

REPUBLICANS VOTING YES (24): Ball, Caswell, Caul, DeRoche, Farhat, Hummel, Jones, Kahn, Kooiman, LaJoy, D. Law, Marleau, Meyer, Moore, Mortimer, Nitz, Nofs, Palsrok, Pavlov, Proos, Rocca, Shaffer, Stahl, Stewart.

DEMOCRATS VOTING YES (49): Accavitti, Adamini, Anderson, Angerer, Bennett, Bieda, Brown, Byrnes, Byrum, Cheeks, Clack, Clemente, Condino, Cushingberry, Dillon, Donigan, Espinoza, Farrah, Gillard, Gleason, Gonzales, Hood, Hopgood, Kolb, K. Law, Leland, Lemmons III, Lemmons Jr., Lipsey, Mayes, McConico, McDowell, Meisner, Miller, Murphy, Plakas, Polidori, Sak, Sheltrown, A. Smith, V. Smith, Spade, Tobocman, Vagnozzi, Waters, Whitmer, Williams, Wojno, Zelenko.

REPUBLICANS VOTING NO (24 Republicans): Acciavatti, Amos, Baxter, Booher, Brandenburg, Casperson, Drolet, Elsenheimer, Emmons, Gaffney, Garfield, Gosselin, Green, Hansen, Hildenbrand, Hoogendyk, Huizenga, Hune, Moolenaar, Newell, Palmer, Pearce, Robertson, Schuitmaker, Sheen, Stakoe, Steil, Taub, Vander Veen, Van Regenmorter, Walker, Ward, Wenke.

ABSENT (1 Democrat): Hunter.